

Message Text

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S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 1146

EXDIS

DEPARTMENT PASS OTHER AREA POSTS AS DESIRED

EO 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, PINT, XF, SY

SUBJECT: STRENGTH OF ASAD'S POSITION

1. SUMMARY: WHILE ASAD HAS HIS CRITICS, BOTH FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC, WE RATE HIS OVERALL POSITION AS STRONG.

2. OUR SUBMISSION OF FOLLOWING THOUGHTS AND IMPRESSIONS WAS STIMULATED BY LEBANESE FONMIN TAQLA'S REQUEST TO AMBASSADOR GODLEY FOR OUR APPRAISLA OF ASAD'S POSITION. IF DEPARTMENT APPROVES THEIR BEING SHARED WITH TAQLA, I REQUEST THIS EMBASSY NOT BE QUOTED AS THE SOURCE.

3. PALESTINE PROBLEM: THIS ISSUE IS FOR ASAD, AS IT HAS BEEN FOR HIS PREDECESSORS OVER THE PAST GENERATION, THE SOURCE OF THE MOST SERIOUS PRESSURES UPON HIM AS LEADER OF SYRIA. WHAT HE DOES OR FAILS TO DO FOR THE PALESTINIAN CAUSE BECOMES A POTENT WEAPON IN THE HANDS OF HIS CRITICS, TO BE WIELDED WHETHER SINCERELY OR CYNICALLY AGAINST HIM. SYRIA'S HISTORIC APPROACH TO THE PALESTINIAN PROBLEM AND TO THE EXISTENCE OF ISRAEL HAS BEEN HARDLINE. THE FORCE OF THIS TRADITION LIMITS ASAD'S ROOM FOR MANEUVER ALTHOUGH LESS SOHTHAN FOR ANY LEADER OF SYRIA SINCE THE FIRST ARAB-ISRAELI WAR. THE MOST STRIKING PROOF OF THE STRENGTH OF HIS POSITION

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IS THAT ASAD CAN TALK OPENLY ABOUT SYRIA'S NEED FOR PEACE

AND HIS WILLINGNESS TO SIGN A PEACE TREATY WITH ISRAEL, ONCE IT HAS RETURNED TO ITS 1967 BORDERS AND RENDERED JUSTICE TO THE PALESTINIANS. AT THE SAME TIME HE IS AWARE HE MUST NOT APPEAR TOO FLEXIBLE ON THE GAMUT OF ISRAELI-ARAB ISSUES. FOR EXAMPLE, WHILE ASAD HAS BEEN FAR LESS A TARGET OF CRITICISM BY THE REJECTIONISTS THAN SADAT, HIS CLOSE ASSOCIATES APPARENTLY WERE CONCERNED THAT HE WAS BECOMING TOO CLOSELY IDENTIFIED WITH THE SECRETARY'S RECENT PEACEMAKING EFFORTS, ESPECIALLY AT A STAGE WHEN THERE WAS LITTLE ASSURANCE OF DIRECT GAIN FOR SYRIA. AFTER THE SECRETARY SUSPENDED HIS SHUTTLE LAST WEEK, ONE OF ASAD'S CLOSE ASSOCIATES COMMENTED TO US THAT SAAD'S MEETINGS WITH THE SECRETARY WERE CREATING AN IMPRESSION IN THIS COUNTRY THAT THE PRESIDENT MIGHT HAVE BEEN BARGAINING AWAY PALESTINIAN RIGHTS IN RETURN FOR PART OR EVEN ALL OF GLOAN.

4. RADICAL ARAB PRESSURES: IT IS EASIER TO DESCRIBE THE EXTERNAL THAN THE INTERNAL PRESSURES ON ASAD. HIS COUNTRY'S TRADITIONAL HARDLINE POSITION MAKES HIM A TARGET FOR ENTICEMENT AND PRESSURE FROM THE RADICAL SIDE REPRESENTED BY BAGHDAD, TRIPOLI AND ALGERIA, NOT TO MENTION THE PALESTINIAN EXTREMISTS. ASAD'S SPONSORSHIP OF THE JOINT SYRO-PALESTINIAN MILITARY AND POLITICAL COMMANDS WAS IN PART A WAY OF DEALING WITH THESE PRESSURES. THE MARCH VISITS HERE BY BOUTEFlickA AND LIBYAN RCC REP MUHAYSHI WERE TWO RECENT MOVES ON THE ARAB CHESSBOARD WHICH SPOTLIGHTED EXTERNAL PRESSURES OPERATING ON THE SYRIAN LEADERSHIP. ALGERIAN POLICY IS THE MORE INTRICATE OF THESE EXTERNAL FORCES. BOUMEDIENE ALLEGEDLY TOLD THE YUGOSLAV AMBASSADOR IN ALGERIA RECENTLY THAT HIS PRINCIPAL AIM IN TRYING TO IMPROVE IRAN-IRAQ RELATIONS WAS TO RELEASE IRAQI ENERGY AND EQUIPMENT FOR ANY FUTURE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT. ALGERIA, BOUMEDIENE CONTINUED, INTENDED TO BECOME OVERALL MORE ACTIVE IN NEAR EASTERN AFFAIRS THAN IT HAD BEEN. AS FAR AS WE CAN DETERMINE, BOUTEFlickA STOPPED HERE ENROUTE TO TEHRAN MARCH 15 TO ASSESS FOR BOUMEDIENE THE CURRENT OUTLOOK OF THE SYRIAN LEADERSHIP RATHER THAN TO PRESSURE THE SYRIANS, DURING HIS ALL NIGHT MEETING WITH ASAD, TO TAKE ANY PARTICULAR LINE OF ACTION. (IT IS LOGICAL TO ASSUME NONETHELESS THAT ANY ALGERIAN INTERVENTION CONCERNING ARAB-SECRET

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ISRAEL NEGOTIATIONS WOULD BE HARDLINE, GIVEN THEIR TENDENCY TO VIEW OTHER ARABS' SITUATIONS THROUGH THE OPTIC OF THE ALGERIAN REVOLUTION.)

5. WHILE THERE IS NO SOLID EVIDENCE OF SPECIFIC LIBYAN PRESSURES ON ASAD, THERE IS A BROAD HINT THAT QADHAFI IN SENDING MUHAYSHI HERE IN EARLY MARCH SOUGHT TO ENCOURAGE SARG SUSPICIONS OF SECRETARY KISSINGER'S DIPLOMACY AND TO GOAD

SYRIA INTO INCREASING ITS PRESSURE ON CAIRO IN OPPOSITION TO THE SECRETARY'S EFFORTS. WE UNDERSTAND THAT, THROUGH MUHAYSHI, QADHAFI PLEDGED FULL LIBYAN FINANCIAL AND MILITARY SUPPORT TO SYRIA.

6. IRAQ: TAQLA MENTIONED SPECIFICALLY HIS IMPRESSION THAT SYRIAN-IRAQI BAATH CONFLICT IS AT A "NEW HIGH." BAGHDAD'S POLICY TOWARDS SYRIA EXCITES CONSTANT UNEASINESS HERE IN A RELATIONSHIP DOMINATED BY MUTUAL ACCUSATIONS OF HERESY. IRAQI HOSTILITY HAS BEEN MANIFEST AND, ACCORDING TO ONE WELL-INFORMED JOURNALIST (EDWARD SAAB OF BEIRUT'S L'ORIENT-LEJOUR), IRAQ CONTINUES TO SERVE AS A MAGNET FOR YOUNG SYRIAN BAATHIS WHO TRAVEL THERE TO WORK FOR THE DAY OF SYRIA'S EVENTUAL LIBERATION FROM THE "IMPOSTERS" (ASAD AND CO.). USINT BAGHDAD HAS RECENTLY COMMENTED THAT ANTI-SYRIAN PRONOUNCEMENTS WERE BEING MADE IN THE NAME OF THE REGIONAL COMMAND IN IRAQ AND NOT THAT OF THE GOI. IT IS CONCEIVABLE, BUT NO EVIDENCE IS YET IN OUR HANDS, THAT AS SADDAM HUSSEIN CONTINUES TO ENJOY DIPLOMATIC AND POLITICAL SUCCESSES, HE MAY MOVE TO IMPROVE IRAQ'S TROUBLED RELATIONS WITH DAMASCUS. IT COULD GO IN JUST THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION. SAAB SAYS SADDAM REMAINS COMMITTED TO THE LONG RANGE OBJECTIVE OF BRINGING A "TRUE BAATHI" GOVERNMENT TO POWER IN SYRIA. (WE HAVE FRAGMENTARY, BUT REASONABLY RELIABLE REPORTS THAT WITHIN PAST TEN DAYS A NUMBER -- PERHAPS AS MANY AS 100-- OF SYRIAN BAATHIS SYMPATHETIC TO THE IRAQI WING HAVE BEEN ROUNDED UP IN ALEPPO AND DAMASCUS AND TEMPORARILY IMPRISONED. BUT WE HAVE ASSUMED TO THIS POINT THAT THESE ARRESTS HAVE BEEN IN CONNECTION WITH REGIONAL COMMAND ELECTIONS UNDERWAY IN SYRIA RATHER THAN ANY DIRECT THREAT FROM IRAQ.) THE FOREGOING NOTWITHSTANDING WE ASSESS BAGHDAD'S ABILITY TO MAKE SERIOUS TROUBLE FOR ASAD AS LIMITED.

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ACTION SS-25

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R 271110Z MAR 75

FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3067

INFO AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

S E C R E T SECTION 2 OF 2 DAMASCUS 1146

EXDIS

DEPARTMENT PASS OTHER AREA POSTS AS DESIRED

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, PINT, XF, SY

SUBJ: STRENGTH OF ASAD'S POSITION

7. DOMESTIC PRESSURES: THE FAVORITE SYRIAN ADJECTIVE FOR ANY OF THEIR POLITICIANS IN OR OUT OF POWER IS "OPPORTUNIST." AFTER FOUR AND ONE HALF YEARS IN POWER ASAD HAS AMONG HIS ENEMIES FORMER MILITARY OFFICERS, A LARGE NUMBER OF WHOM HE HAS RETIRED OVER THE YEARS ON GROUNDS OF INCOMPETENCE AND/OR DISLOYALTY. HE ALSO INHERITED THE DISAFFECTION OF MANY SYRIAN OFFICERS RETIRED ON POLITICAL GROUNDS BEFORE HIS OWN ACCESSION TO POWER WHATEVER WERE THEIR PROFESSIONAL CAPABILITIES.

8. ASAD, FOR ALL HIS SKILL IN BRIDGING THE GAP, WILL ALWAYS BE VULNERABLE AS LEADER OF A SMALL MINORITY--SYRIA'S ALAWITE COMMUNITY. IT WAS ONLY A MONTH OR SO AFTER THE OCTOBER WAR, DURING WHICH HE FORGED A REMARKABLE SENSE OF NATIONAL PURPOSE AND UNITY, THAT RESENTMENTS VOICED BY THE SUNNI MAJORITY AGAINST ALAWITE DOMINANCE WERE AGAIN BEING HEARD AROUND DAMASCUS. ALAWITES WHO IN THE POST-WORLD WAR II GENERATION MADE THEIR WAY STEADILY TO THE CENTER OF POWER, THROUGH ADVANCEMENT IN THE SYRIAN ARMY AND TO A LESSER EXTENT THE PROFESSIONS, HAVE NOW DISCOVERED HOW EASY IT IS TO TURN POLITICAL
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POWER TO THEIR INDIVIDUAL ECONOMIC ADVANTAGES. THIS HAS REPORTEDLY RAISED SHARP RESENTMENT IN THE SUNNI COMMUNITY AS THEY SEE ALAWITES "HORNING IN" ON VARIOUS BUSINESS DEALS. THE PRESIDENT'S BROTHER, RIFAT, IS HELD BY MANY TO BE ASAD'S ACHILLES' HEEL BECAUSE OF RIFAT'S UNLIMITED GREED FOR HIMSELF AND HIS IMMEDIATE ENTOURAGE.

9. CORRUPTION IN THE BUREAUCRACY IS REPORTEDLY ON THE RISE. ALTHOUGH THE PRESENT IS NOT HIMSELF A DIRECT TARGET OF SUCH ACCUSATIONS, CRITICISM ABOUT THE INCREASE IN CORRUPTION INEVITABLY RUBS OFF ON HIM AS THE NATIONAL LEADER.

10. THE LEAST EASILY MEASURED DOMESTIC THREAT TO ASAD'S LEADERSHIP IS POSED BY EXTREMISTS IN THE ACTIVE MILITARY AND IN THE CIVILIAN WINGS OF THE BAATH WHO ARE, OR CLAIM TO BE, UNHAPPY ABOUT HIS GOAL OF FINDING A POLITICAL SOLUTION FOR THE ARAB-ISRAELI PROBLEM. NO CONCLUSIVE IDENTIFICATION

HAS YET BEEN MADE OF THE AUTHORS OF THE BOMBINGS IN DAMASCUS WHICH BEGAN LAST AUGUST AND WHICH WERE GENERALLY FELT TO BE A PROTEST AGAINST THE PRESIDENT'S POLICY OF SEEKING A PEACEFUL SOLUTION. THE INABILITY OF SYRIA'S ELABORATE SECURITY APPARATUS, WHOSE CHIEFS ARE AMONG THE HANDFUL OF ASAD'S INTIMATES, TO UNCOVER THE PERPETRATORS TEMPTS US TO CONCLUDE THAT THE AUTHORS ENJOYED PROTECTORS WITHIN THE MOST SENSITIVE ORGANS OF STATE SECURITY. ADMITTEDLY THESE BOMBINGS HAVE BEEN EASILY STAGED AND COULD HAPPEN IN ANY CAPITAL IN THE WORLD; THEY REQUIRE LIMITED MATERIALS AND FEW HANDS TO CARRY THEM OFF. NONETHELESS, THE REGIME'S CONTINUED INABILITY TO FIX UNQUESTIONED RESPONSIBILITY ON ANY ONE GROUP, ALTHOUGH THE PFLP IS THE MOST COMMONLY ACCUSED, POINTS TO DISSENT WITHIN THE STATE SECURITY SERVICES. HOW EXTENSIVE THIS DISSENT MAY BE NO ONE WILL HAZARD A GUESS.

11. ASAD'S SUPPORTERS: OVER AND AGAINST THIS EVIDENCE OR SUSPICION OF INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL PRESSURE ON ASAD, ONE MUST BALANCE THE FACT THAT THE PRESIDENT HAS AN UNPARALLELED TRACK RECORD OF SURVIVAL AND STEADY ADVANCEMENT TO THE TOP IN SYRIAN POLITICS DATING FROM HIS EARLY PARTICIPATION IN THE SECRET MILITARY COMMITTEE OF SYRIAN
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OFFICERS ORGANIZED IN CAIRO IN 1958. HIS TOTAL TIME IN OFFICE AS PRESIDENT HAS TODAY EXCEEDED THAT OF ADIB SHISHEKLI, THE ONLY OTHER SYRIAN LEADER TO HAVE HELD OFFICE FOR A COMPARABLE PERIOD SINCE INDEPENDENCE. HE HAS TAMED AND HARNESSSED THE NASSERISTS, COMMUNISTS AND ARAB SOCIALISTS INTO AN INEFFECTIVE BUT PRESTIGIOUS NATIONAL FRONT. HE HAS INHERITED THE POPULAR GRATITUDE ACCRUING TO THE BAATH FROM ITS EARLIEST LAND REFORM PROGRAMS BENEFITING THE POVERTY-STRICKEN VILLAGERS. HIS ACTIONS TO LIBERALIZE DOMESTIC COMMERCE AND TO ALLOW A ROLE TO A NEW CLASS OF AGGRESSIVE YOUNG CAPITALISTS ACTING AS MIDDLEMEN FOR FOREIGN SELLERS HAS WON HIM THE AFFECTION OF THAT DYNAMIC GROUP. THE STABILITY HE HAS GIVEN TO SYRIA IS APPRECIATED BY THE SIZEABLE CLASS OF SMALL SHOPKEEPERS WHO ARE OVERWHELMINGLY SUNNIS. HE HAS MADE HIMSELF ACCESSIBLE TO OTHER MINORITIES TO WHOM HE HAS MADE SUCH GESTURES AS SANCTIONING RETURN OF NATIONALIZED SCHOOLS TO THE CATHOLIC CHURCH. HE HAS, IN OPENING SYRIA TO NORMAL (AND HIGHLY PROFITABLE) RELATIONS WITH OTHER ARAB STATES SUCCESSFULLY IDENTIFIED HIMSELF AS A FRIEND OF ARAB LEADERS FROM THE LATE FAISAL TO QADHAFI. A GREATER TOLERANCE OF DISSENTING OPINION AND A LIGHTENING OF THE OPPRESSIVE, POLICE STATE CHARACTER OF THE BAATHI LEADERSHIP FROM 1963-70 HAS BEEN WIDELY APPLAUDED. HIS DETERMINATION TO GET ON WITH THE LONG NEGLECTED TASKS OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT HERE HAS ALSO PLEASED

THIS WAR-WEARY POPULATION. ABOVE ALL HE HAS
WON A WAR, RESTORED SYRIAN PRIDE AND SELF-CONFIDENCE
AND ADROITLY USED PATRONAGE TO FAVOR THE CURRENT OFFICER
CORPS MAKING IT POSSIBLE FOR THEM TO OWN THEIR OWN
APARTMENTS, VEHICLES, ETC. NONE OF THESE ACTIONS, WE
ARE THE FIRST TO ADMIT, HAVE MADE ASAD'S POSITION
IMPREGNABLE OR RENDERED WOULD-BE SUCCESSORS LESS INTERESTED
IN HIS OVERTHROW. IT IS PROBABLE THAT JUST AS MANY OF
HIS SUPPORTERS AS HIS CRITICS DESERVE THE LABEL OF
"OPPORTUNIST."

12. OUR OVER-RIDING IMPRESSION, HOWEVER, IS THAT IN THE
CONTEXT OF THIS COUNTRY WHOSE CITIZENS TEND PROUDLY TO
DESCRIBE THEMSELVES AS UNGOVERNABLE, ASAD'S ACHIEVEMENTS
AND STAYING POWER HAVE BEEN REMARKABLE. HE ACTS WITH
CONSUMMATE PERSONAL CONFIDENCE AND WORKS AS HARD OR
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HARDER THAN ANY OTHER SYRIAN. HE IS MASTERMINDING THIS
WEEK'S BAATH PARTY ELECTIONS LEADING TO THE FORMA-
TION OF A NEW REGIONAL COMMAND AND THEN, IT IS WIDELY
RUMORED, AN EXTENSIVE RESHAPING OF THE SYRIAN CABINET. WHATEVER
NEW LOOK FOR SYRIA RESULTS FROM THIS PROCESS, NO SYRIAN IS
SUGGESTING IT WILL BE ANYTHING LESS THAN A FAITHFUL
REFLECTION OF WHAT ASAD WANTS FOR HIS REGIME AND HIS COUNTRY.
IN SUM, ASAD GIVES EVERY SIGN OF BEING A MAN WHO HAS
LEARNED MUCH AND FORGOTTEN NONE OF THE TRICKS OF HOW TO
ATTAIN AND MAINTAIN POWER IN SYRIA.
MURPHY

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